Spin Doctor

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Spin Doctor

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The term "spin doctor" is an amalgam of "spin," meaning the interpretation or slant placed on events (which is a sporting metaphor, referring to the spin a pool player puts on a cue ball), and "doctor," derived from the figurative uses of the word to mean patch up, piece together, and falsify. The "doctor" part also derives from the employment of professionals rather than untrained amateurs to administer the spin.

The term "spin doctor" was coined by American novelist Saul Bellow, who spoke in his 1977 Jefferson Lecture about political actors "capturing the presidency itself with the aid of spin doctors." The word "spin" first appeared in the press on January 22, 1979, in a *Guardian Weekly* article; the phrase "spin doctor" first appeared in the press on October 21, 1984, in a *New York Times* editorial commenting on the televising of presidential debates. It took another decade until it was picked up by academics: Maltese (1994, 215–216) discussed the significance of spin doctoring for political communication, and Sumpter and Tankard (1994) for public relations. Theoretical concepts most closely related to spin are priming and framing (→ Framing of the News; Priming Theory). Medvic (2001), for example, considers "deliberate priming" as the main responsibility of spin doctors, by which he means producing campaign messages that focus on issues that are to a politician's advantage and trigger appropriate schemas within targeted voters when evaluating the politician. Other works tied spinning to "strategic framing," which Bennett (2005) defines as delivering a message with the "right" scripting to lead journalists to pick the preferred category for accentuating the message (→ Election Campaign Communication; Strategic Framing).

It should be pointed out that many scholars do not take spin doctoring too seriously, because it is neither a neutral scientific concept (such as "communication") nor the

self-labeling of a branch (such as → "public relations"), but rather a biased term used by journalists to discredit, hype, or mystify the work of political public relations (PR) experts (e.g., as powerful manipulators; → Political Consultant). To discuss the term's relevance for political communication research it seems helpful to distinguish a realist and a constructionist position. The realist position tries to answer the question of what spin doctoring actually means, where spin doctors are active, and what they actually do. The constructionist position doubts the existence of spin doctors as such and considers the use of the term a rhetorical strategy; it tries to answer the question why this term has become such a prominent media phenomenon.

REALIST APPROACH

Arguing from a realist position, Andrews (2006) distinguishes four stages with regard to how the term "spin doctoring" has been used and how it has changed its meaning in the process. Initially, spin was used as a *technical definition* of a specific US campaign tactic whereby, after a televised presidential debate had ended, campaign operatives emerged to try to massage how reporters interpreted the meaning of the event (→ Televised Debates). "Spinning gave political handlers a chance to explain away and thus repair the damage a candidate had done to himself, or to inflict damage on the opponent that their candidate might not have" (Rosenstiel 1994, 309). The practice of party officials patrolling their media contacts after major campaign events turned out to be of mutual benefit, because reporters were keen to speak to dependable sources capable of giving them an instant interpretation as well as background guidance on the likely consequences (→ News Sources). The 1988 US presidential election was a watershed insofar as for the first time the news media reported extensively on the practice of spin doctoring (Lemert et al. 1991).

In the second phase, the term rapidly spread to other countries and considerably *broadened in meaning*. From a specific post-debate tactic it came to signify anyone or anything included in what were believed to be the black arts of campaigning (Andrews 2006). By using the term in an increasingly arbitrary fashion, journalists themselves were arguably putting a spin on minor stories, presumably to increase readers' interest. As a result, campaign techniques as varied as briefing journalists, explaining campaign strategy or candidates' actions to journalists, attacking opponents, rapid rebuttals, speech and → image consulting, media monitoring, → political advertising, or opinion polling (→ Public Opinion Polling) were all attributed to spin doctors, a cross-national content analysis of campaign coverage found (Esser et al. 2001; → Content Analysis, Quantitative).

A contributing factor to a broadening understanding of spin doctoring was the documentary *The War Room*. This showed Clinton advisors James Carville and George Stephanopoulos engaged in a wide range of campaign activities during the 1992 presidential election. The press pictured Carville's and Stephanopoulos' personalities as so intriguing that it turned them into celebrities. Both readily admitted to being spin doctors (and even labeled themselves as such) and appeared on news programs, on talk shows, and in people magazines (as did Alastair Campbell or Peter Mandelson a few years later in Great Britain). Journalists and campaigners in other countries were also fascinated by *The War Room* and how it staged the campaign process as a glamorous sort of warfare. In the 1990s, carefully planned backstage access for journalists to observe the process of image

construction became an essential element of campaigns in many modern democracies. This highly managed strategy of meta-imaging (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles 1999) triggered a new type of campaign coverage called meta-coverage (Esser & D'Angelo 2003).

In the third stage, spin made the progression to an encompassing word for *media operations of political institutions*. Important milestones in this development were John A. Maltese's book *Spin control* (1994), Howard Kurtz's book *Spin cycle* (1998), and Dick Morris's insider account *Behind the Oval Office* (1997). Maltese classified as spin control any measure by the White House Office of Communication – responsible for long-term PR planning – that governments since Richard Nixon used in an effort to influence media coverage of administrations and their policies. Kurtz focused on the White House chief press secretary Mike McCurry, characterized as a master of spin, and described his Press Office Staff as being engaged in a constant spin cycle designed to reactively downplay negative issues and proactively promote positive issues. Clinton adviser Morris emphasized the importance of bypassing the cynical mainstream news media and holding instead what he called a second conversation with the general public, by listening to it through polls and talking to it through ads. The same broadening of meaning signified by the term "spin doctor" could be observed in Great Britain. From there it was only a short way to the fourth and final stage when authors begun to equate spin doctoring with any type of commercial PR (see Andrews 2006).

CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

Against the backdrop of this development, it becomes clear that any attempt to classify this particular circle of consultants precisely is an undertaking doomed to fail. The broad use of the term makes it difficult if not impossible to adequately define spin doctors from a realist position. As a consequence, the constructionist position explicitly steps away from the idea that the term "spin doctor" refers to a specifically defined group of people. This approach turns its attention to the question of why there is suddenly a new expression for a well-known and long-established profile of tasks (i.e., political PR). The constructionist position starts from the observation that newly emerging occupations (such as PR) try to attain greater professional recognition by employing strategies of self-promotion. This strategy involves stage-managing one's own importance by publicly promoting the marketable values of one's activity. In other words, this strategy is based less on the question of whether someone possesses certain professional characteristics or not, and more on the question of whether one is able to act and appear professional.

According to this *strategic approach toward professionalization*, the key resource for political PR experts in managing their professional status focuses on the presentation of their own performance. While the majority of political PR experts does not seem to go this route and prefers to remain invisible to the public, a small media-savvy minority began pursuing this strategy actively in the 1990s. These consultants consciously sought the media limelight and had a strong self-interest in creating and sustaining the myth of powerful, omnipotent "spin doctors." Nowadays, there is probably nobody who would like to admit to being a spin doctor, but for some time the term appeared new and seemed to help some political PR experts to set themselves apart from existing or related occupations. Due to the media attention they received, this small group was highly visible

but not representative of the occupation of political PR experts as a whole. This mechanism helps explain the professional image of consultants that in some countries has remained distorted to this date (Tenscher 2003).

The second argument of the constructionist position refers to the behavior of journalists: they also had an interest in creating and sustaining the *myth of the spin doctor*. Initially, journalists used the term to hype or mystify political PR because it corresponded to an important journalistic demand: it adds drama and color to otherwise boring, stage-managed events. Stories about spin are enjoyable to write and easy to research because they naturally take place in the journalists' own direct environment. Undoubtedly, one can also assume a fair degree of professional narcissism when journalists report on political PR, because they implicitly write about themselves as the subject of news management. Later, journalists used the term in a more degrading manner in order to discredit the legitimate aims of candidates, parties, and governments to assert themselves against increasingly autonomous and powerful media organizations, which often pursue an agenda of their own and whose motives are not always exclusively oriented toward the public welfare. The *demonization of spin* is to be understood as a counter-strategy of journalists to prove their independence and legitimacy (→ Journalists' Role Perception). Yet the discrediting use of the spin metaphor by journalists oftentimes conceals the fact that political PR experts provide essential information, without which the media could not possibly carry out their task of informing the public about the internal mechanism of the political process.

The third argument of the constructionist position is that the widely noticed increase in news reports about political PR must be seen as an outcome of a new, modernized, and *media-centered approach to policymaking and campaigning* (→ Media Democracy; Media Logic). Just as politicians have become adept at devising strategies geared toward effectively communicating their policy and image messages to the electorate, so, too, have journalists adapted to these changing circumstances by weaving into stories information about the behaviors and roles of political publication experts, as well as about the behaviors and roles of journalists. On this basis, Esser & D'Angelo (2003, 2006) developed a theory of meta-coverage that works from the premise that journalists are compelled to cover political PR in order to accurately describe, interpret, and analyze the media politics environment.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Content Analysis, Quantitative ▶ Election Campaign Communication ▶ Framing of the News ▶ Image ▶ Journalists' Role Perception ▶ Media Democracy ▶ Media Logic ▶ News Sources ▶ Political Advertising ▶ Political Consultant ▶ Priming Theory ▶ Public Opinion Polling ▶ Public Relations ▶ Strategic Communication ▶ Strategic Framing ▶ Televised Debates

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Spin and Double-Speak

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The term "spin" has historically been associated with political and governmental campaigns. Two prominent citations stem from the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. In 1977, *Washington Post* staff writer Spencer Rich wrote an editorial about Mike Pertschuk, former chief counsel and staff director, Senate Commerce Committee. Rich accused Pertschuk of "being too ardent a consumer advocate, of 'lobbying' members of the committee on behalf of things he thinks are good, of putting his own philosophical 'spin' on options, of being too close to Ralph Nader, of having excessive influence on Magnuson; in short, of acting like the '101st senator.'" In 1984, under the headline "The debates and the spin doctors," *New York Times* editorial writer Jack Rosenthal predicted that "a bazaar will suddenly materialize in the pressroom" during a presidential debate between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. He explained: "A dozen men in good suits and women in silk dresses will circulate smoothly among the reporters, spouting confident opinions. They won't be just press agents trying to impart a favorable spin to a routine release. They'll be the Spin Doctors, senior advisors to the candidates, and they'll be playing for very high stakes."

Doublespeak appears to be a "close cousin" to spin. Kinnick stated, "doublespeak represents a language that is strategically chosen to distort or obscure reality. It is often associated with misleading advertising claims, unethical politicians, and public relations

'spin doctors' who use language to frame a subject in the most positive light" (2005, 260; → Spin Doctor).

Somewhere between its early beginnings among the political arena and its present-day use, the term "spin" has become associated with the public relations profession. Sumpter and Tankard (1994) identified the *spin model* as an alternative approach being practiced in the public relations industry. Part of the reasons this profession may be connected with spinning behavior is because these practitioners have been – historically – associated with using → propaganda techniques. The term *propaganda* itself has a negative connotation. So we should consider the way we engage in and discuss the concept of strategic → persuasion. The term *motivation* has a much more positive connotation, and people seem more responsive to being *motivated* to do something than being *persuaded* to do it.

With something of the ominous and the conspiracy theory about it, the public relations spin model still prevails today. Evidence lies not only in the profession but also in the plethora of literature written about spin and its relationship to → public relations. The reasons behind this association are open to speculation; however, they may stem from misrepresentation and misinformation.

Public relations activities are very diverse. Some practitioners engage in publicity and promotional activities, and they utilize varying propaganda-type techniques (bandwagon, glittering generalities, etc.) and persuasive methods (→ Bandwagon Effect). Although this paradigm determines how many public relations professionals have been depicted on television, in the newspaper, and in movies, these are *not* the only kinds of activities in which practitioners are involved. Public relations professionals are responsible for much more, including strategic planning and counseling, → fundraising, researching, and developing and maintaining relationships between an organization and its key publics (→ Public Relations Planning; Strategic Framing). This is just a range – not a cumulative list by any means. And public relations is practiced among a variety of disciplines, ranging from health-care, government, entertainment, and travel/tourism to corporate, nonprofit, and financial institutions (→ Health Campaigns, Communication in; Issue Management in Politics; Political Consultant; Political Marketing; Financial Communication).

There are several reasons why the communication profession supports strategic persuasion:

- Every issue has two sides; hence, there are two viewpoints.
- Practitioners are merely utilizing framing and agenda-setting strategies (→ Agenda-Setting Effects) to disseminate their messages.
- Practitioners are responsible for advocating the viewpoint of the organization they represent, on the basis of the fiduciary relationship/commitment between the organization and its stockholders.
- Strategic persuasion has been around for centuries (e.g., James E. Grunig's [1992] press agentry model, Edward Bernays's [1923] "engineering" of → public opinion).
- Society should be exposed to a "free marketplace of ideas," which, in turn, supports socially responsible behavior.
- Strategic persuasion supports the absolutist view of the First Amendment to the US Constitution and corresponding provisions in other countries, and of moral judgment: actions are moral provided they yield positive consequences through moral conformity to moral rules.

There are also several reasons why the communication profession denounces spin:

- Spinning is unethical behavior because it misrepresents and distorts truth (→ Public Relations Ethics).
- Spinning is the antithesis of J. E. Grunig's two-way symmetrical model of public relations, which seeks to develop mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics.
- Spinning is a form of propaganda that, when used deceitfully and manipulatively, does not fairly represent the information.
- The spin model suggests that public relations professionals are nothing more than "press agents" whose main goal and obligations are to "earn ink" and to make their organization "look good."
- The word "spin" has a negative connotation, and "perception is reality"; hence, some may view this negative word and its association with the behavior it represents as representative of the behavior of *all* practitioners.
- The spin paradigm does not support socially responsible behavior.

The word "spin" will never completely go away. However, by being kept alive via use in everyday dialogue, the word's existence is perpetuated, thereby giving it power to survive. Communication professionals should strive to diminish its use as a commonplace term among the media and further be committed to practicing ethical communication. Further still, they should never deceitfully manipulate a message to communicate half-truths. And the behavior of those who assert that they practice spin as their "duty" as communication professionals should be discouraged.

Finally, the public relations profession, in particular, should continue to educate people about what it is and its contribution to society. People need to be reminded that, although publicity and promotional strategies are viable components of the communication mix, they are not the sole functions of public relations. Furthermore, instead of advocating *propaganda* as the foundation for these activities, we need to broaden our thinking to that of *motivating* particular behaviors that influence positive changes in our society and of the free marketplace of ideas.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Agenda-Setting Effects ▶ Bandwagon Effect ▶ Financial Communication ▶ Fundraising ▶ Health Campaigns, Communication in ▶ Issue Management in Politics ▶ Persuasion ▶ Political Communication ▶ Political Consultant ▶ Political Marketing ▶ Political Persuasion ▶ Propaganda ▶ Public Opinion ▶ Public Relations ▶ Public Relations Ethics ▶ Public Relations Planning ▶ Rhetoric, Argument, and Persuasion ▶ Spin Doctor ▶ Strategic Communication ▶ Strategic Framing

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Spiral of Silence

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Developed by German survey and communication researcher → Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in the 1960s and 1970s, the spiral of silence theory describes collective opinion formation and societal decision-making in situations where the issue being debated or decided upon is controversial and morally loaded (→ Public Opinion; Conflict as Media Content; Social Conflict and Communication). The theory is one of the most frequently cited and debated to emerge from the field of communication studies during the latter half of the twentieth century.

In the literature in the field, the spiral of silence theory is often reduced to a single premise, i.e., that people who feel their opinion is held by the minority tend to fall silent in public. Although this is a perfectly accurate description of one key aspect of the theory, it is in fact just one element of a far more comprehensive theory of how public opinion functions. This theory rests on the notion that there is such a thing as a "*social nature of humans*," which causes people to fear social isolation and thus substantially influences their actions in public. The term "*public opinion*" then refers to opinions or behavior that can be displayed or expressed in public without running the risk of social isolation or, in some cases, that even must be displayed to avoid the danger of isolation. The term → "public" is here interpreted in a social psychological perspective as a state of consciousness in which individuals who are subjected to the gaze of those around them consciously realize that their actions are "seen by all" and "heard by all." People must therefore constantly monitor the reactions of others in their environment (→ Social Perception).

Accordingly, Noelle-Neumann views public opinion as a form of *social control* that ultimately applies to everyone, regardless of social class. She states that this control is apparent in many areas of life, ranging from controversial political issues to → fashion, morals, and values. Noelle-Neumann's understanding of public opinion stands in contrast